

Philippines

Prez won't show bank details

Duterte's foes, allies to block CHR budget cut

MANILA, Sept 13, (Agencies): Philippine President **Rodrigo Duterte**'s critics and allies in the Senate vowed on Wednesday to block a lower house move to slash the annual budget of a public-funded human rights agency opposed to his bloody war on drugs to just \$20.

The house, dominated by Duterte's supporters, voted on Tuesday to allocate a 2018 budget of just 1,000 pesos (\$20) to the Commission on Human Rights (CHR), which has investigated hundreds of killings during the president's ferocious anti-narcotics crackdown.

Vice-President Leni Robredo, who was not Duterte's running mate and has locked horns with him numerous times, said the lawmakers' move effectively abolishes the CHR, a constitutional body.



Duterte

Duterte's signature campaign has left thousands of mostly urban poor Filipinos dead. Critics say the lawmakers are trying to retaliate against the CHR for pursuing allegations of executions by police during sting operations, which police deny.

The CHR is among the domestic and foreign rights groups that Duterte frequently admonishes, accusing them of lecturing him and disregarding Filipinos who are victims of crimes stemming from drug addiction.

The upper house minority bloc, composed of six staunch critics of the president, will seek to restore the 678 million peso budget the government and a Senate sub-committee had proposed for the CHR.

Senator Risa Hontiveros described the plan to cut the budget to almost nil as "a shameful rejection of the country's international and national commitments to champion human rights".

Scrutinise

Several allies of Duterte in the 24-seat chamber said they would scrutinise the house move and try to ensure the commission had a budget that would allow it to work properly.

Senator Richard Gordon said the CHR had a job to do and should not be restricted.

"That is their role — to expose possible abuses," he said.

Another legislator, JV Ejercito said senators would not make the CHR impotent.

"The CHR is in the thick of things and very relevant nowadays and probably even next year and the years to follow because of what's happening," he said in a statement.

Duterte once threatened to abolish the CHR after its chief, Chito Gascon, sought to investigate alleged abuses by police anti-drugs units.

Duterte on Tuesday appeared to distance himself from the lawmakers proposing the meagre budget. He said CHR was constitutionally created and should probe whatever it wants, adding he was "not here to destroy institutions".

"He had it coming. He opens his mouth in a most inappropriate way. He knows nothing," Duterte said, referring to Gascon.

"The congressmen are really angry. I have nothing against him. Give them a budget for all I care, whatever he likes to investigate."

Duterte directly drew a link between Tuesday night's vote to cut the Commission on Human Rights' annual budget from 678 million pesos (\$13 million) to 1,000 pesos and its investigations of the drug war killings and related criticism by its chairman.

"He had it coming," Duterte told reporters late Tuesday, referring to commission chairman Jose Gascon.

Angry

"They only gave him 1,000 pesos (about \$20) because Congress is angry."

Duterte's allies in the lower house's justice committee on Wednesday also voted to impeach its chief justice after determining corruption allegations against her had substance.

The chief justice, Maria Lourdes Sereno, has been another critic of the drug war.

She wrote Duterte a letter last year expressing concern over him publicly naming seven judges as being involved in the drug trade, warning it made them vulnerable to being killed.

Duterte responded by threatening to declare martial law if Sereno continued to interfere in his drug war.

Should the entire house endorse the justice committee's findings against Sereno, the Senate would convene as an impeachment court.

"This leads us on a direct path to dictatorship," Senator Francis Pangilinan, leader of the Liberal Party, the country's main opposition group, said in response to Tuesday's vote.

Teodoro Casino, a former House member representing the left wing Bayan Muna party, expressed similar sentiments when commenting on the move against Sereno.

Also:

MANILA, Philippines: The Philippine president refused a demand by his most vocal critic to publicly release details of his bank accounts to disprove allegations that he had large sums of undeclared money.

President **Rodrigo Duterte** said in a news conference Wednesday that if opposition Sen **Antonio Trillanes IV** wanted "to get evidence, do not get it from my mouth. You must be stupid... Why would I give you the pleasure?"

Trillanes first alleged Duterte had unexplained wealth during the presidential campaign last year. In February, he publicly raised the issue again because he said Duterte had not yet revealed details of the more than 2 billion pesos (\$39 million) he allegedly kept in bank accounts as a former city mayor.

Duterte inadvertently brought the issue back to public focus recently when he alleged Trillanes has several undeclared joint bank accounts with unidentified Chinese men in **Hong Kong, Malaysia, Australia** and the **United States**.

Trillanes denied it and signed about a dozen waivers for authorities to look into the alleged bank accounts and demanded that Duterte do the same.

Duterte went on a personal attack against Trillanes, one of his harshest critics and a former navy officer once detained for a failed coup plot.



Sultan of Brunei Hassanal Bolkiah (center right), reviews a military honor guard with Chinese President Xi Jinping (center left), during a welcome ceremony outside the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on Sept 13. Hassanal Bolkiah is on a state visit to China. (AFP)

North Korea

South Korea conducts cruise missile drill amid tensions

N. Korea vows to boost arms programmes

SEOUL, Sept 13, (Agencies): North Korea vowed Wednesday to accelerate its weapons programmes in response to "evil" sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council following its latest and most powerful nuclear test.

The respected 38 North website in the US raised its estimate for the yield from the explosion, which Pyongyang says was a hydrogen bomb small enough to fit onto a missile, to around 250 kilotons — more than 16 times the size of the device that devastated Hiroshima in 1945.

The detonation, Pyongyang's sixth nuclear blast, prompted global condemnation and came after it carried out two intercontinental ballistic missile launches in July that appeared to bring much of the US into range.

The UN Security Council unanimously imposed an eighth set of sanctions on the North Monday, banning it from trading in textiles and restricting its oil imports, which US President Donald Trump said was a prelude to stronger measures.

The resolution, passed after Washington toned down its original proposals to secure backing from China and Russia, came just one month after the council banned exports of coal, lead and seafood in response to the ICBM launch.

The North's foreign ministry condemned the new measures "in the strongest terms", calling them a "full-scale economic blockade" driven by the US and aimed at "suffocating" its state and people.

It was "another illegal and evil 'resolution on sanctions' piloted by the US", it said in a statement carried by the official KCNA news agency.

"The DPRK will redouble the efforts to increase its strength to safeguard the country's sovereignty and right to existence," the ministry said, using the abbreviation for the North's official name.

But the South's unification ministry described the statement as "the most low-key form of response from North Korea to UN Security Council resolutions".

Seoul conducted its first live-fire exercise of its new long-range Taurus missile in response to the nuclear test, its Air Force said.

The German air-to-surface weapon was capable of precision strikes on key North Korean facilities even if launched from the central part of the South, it added.

The US and its allies argue that tougher sanctions will pile pressure on North Korea to negotiate an end to its weapons programmes but experts are sceptical.

Measures

US President Donald Trump said the latest measures were a "very small step — not a big deal" that must lead to tougher measures.

"Those sanctions are nothing compared to ultimately what will happen," Trump said, but added that it was "nice to get a 15 to nothing vote".

The North says it needs nuclear weapons to protect itself from "hostile" US forces and analysts believe Pyongyang's weapons programme has made rapid progress under leader Kim Jong-Un, with previous sanctions having done little to deter it.

Government estimates of the yield from its sixth nuclear test vary from South Korea's 50 kilotons to Japan's 160, but 38 North, which is linked to Johns Hopkins University in the US, raised its estimate to "roughly 250 kilotons", in line with upward revisions for the magnitude of the resulting tremor.

South Korea's Nuclear Safety and Security Commission said Wednesday it had collected a small amount of xenon-133 — a radioactive isotope of the inert gas that does not occur naturally — that was "linked to the latest nuclear test".

But the commission said in a statement it was "unable to confirm what type of nuclear test was conducted".

Washington had initially sought a full oil embargo and a freeze on

the foreign assets of leader Kim Jong-Un in response to the blast, but dropped them following strong opposition from China and Russia.

The new resolution instead bans trade in textiles, cuts off natural gas shipments to North Korea, places a ceiling of 2 million barrels a year on deliveries of refined oil products and caps crude oil shipments at current levels. Retail petrol prices in the North jumped earlier this year, with some analysts suggesting the authorities were stockpiling in the expectation of a ban.

According to the US mission to the United Nations, the North imports around 8.5 million barrels a year of oil and oil products, 4 million as crude and 4.5 million in refined form — which includes substances such as petrol and diesel.

It added that the North's textile exports averaged \$760 million a year.

Authorisations

The UN resolution also barred countries from issuing new authorisations to North Korean workers sent abroad. There are almost 100,000 of them, according to the US mission, earning more than \$500 million a year for the regime.

Under the measure, joint ventures with North Korean entities are prohibited, while governments are authorised to inspect ships suspected of carrying banned cargo from the country, but must first seek the consent of the vessels' flag state.

Meanwhile, South Korea said Wednesday it had conducted its first live-fire drill for an advanced air-launched cruise missile that would strengthen its pre-emptive strike capability against North Korea in the event of crisis.

South Korea's military said the Taurus missile fired from an F-15 fighter jet traveled through obstacles at low altitudes before hitting a target off the country's western coast during drills Tuesday.

The missile, manufactured by Germany's Taurus Systems, has a maximum range of 500 kms (310 miles) and is equipped with stealth characteristics that will allow it to avoid radar detection before hitting North Korean targets, according to Seoul's Defense Ministry.

South Korea has been accelerating efforts to ramp up its military capabilities in face of a torrent of nuclear weapons tests by North Korea, which on Sept 3 conducted its sixth and most powerful nuclear test to date.

Shortly after the nuke test, Seoul announced it reached an agreement with Washington to remove the warhead weight limits on South Korean ballistic missiles, which under a bilateral guideline could be built for a maximum range of 800 kms (497 miles).

A pre-emptive strike against Pyongyang's leadership would be difficult to undertake, but it's widely seen as the most realistic of the limited military options Seoul has to deny a nuclear attack from its rival.

In related news, the standoff over North Korea could lead to "nuclear war", a Japanese pro-wrestler turned lawmaker warned on Wednesday, urging nations to dial down the tension after the isolated country fired a missile over northern Japan last month.

Tokyo could play a role in mediating with its neighbour, said the 74-year-old Antonio Inoki, who is known for fighting boxer Muhammad Ali four decades ago.

"We are seeing a situation where each raises his fist and the situation is escalating," Inoki, who recently returned from his 32nd visit to Pyongyang, told a news conference, wearing his signature red scarf.

"It's important to see who can be the first to lower his fist and reduce the tension," said Inoki, who, like US basketball star Dennis Rodman, has made numerous visits to North Korea.

Pyongyang must commit to denuclearisation as a prerequisite for talks, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said in an interview with the Nikkei business daily published on Wednesday.



Japanese wrestler-turned-politician Kanji 'Antonio' Inoki speaks during a press conference at the Foreign Correspondent Club of Japan in Tokyo on Sept 13. Inoki, who has visited North Korea over 30 times, visited Pyongyang in time for the North Korean Foundation Day, on Sept 9. (AFP)



Yang



Lai

Asia

China ups 'cyber defences': China said on Wednesday it will create a national data repository for information on cyber attacks and require telecom firms, internet companies and domain name providers to report threats to it.

The Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) said companies and telcos as well as government bodies must share information on incidents including Trojan malware, hardware vulnerabilities, and content linked to "malicious" IP addresses to the new platform. An MIIT policy note also said that the ministry, which is creating the platform, will be liable for disposing of threats under the new rules, which will take effect on Jan. 1.

Companies and network providers that fail to follow the rules will be subject to "warnings, fines and other administrative penalties", it said, without giving any details.

The law is the latest in a series of moves by Chinese authorities designed to guard core infrastructure and private enterprises against large-scale cyber attacks. (RTRS)

Taiwan preps for typhoon: Taiwan issued a warning to ships and airlines cancelled some flights on Wednesday as the island braced for Typhoon Talim, which was expected to hit cities including the capital Taipei, before hurtling towards China potentially as a super typhoon.

Talim was expected to gain in strength as it sweeps towards Taiwan's northern cities, lashing them with strong wind and heavy rain, the Central Weather Bureau said.

The brunt of the storm would be felt later on Wednesday and on Thursday, when it was expected to slam into the north and northeast with maximum sustained wind speeds of 137 km per hour (85 mph) and gusts of up to 173 km per hour (107 mph), the bureau said.

"Typhoon Talim has been changing course and is not entirely predictable. It's been expected to hit Taiwan directly, but its trajectory has altered further northward and eastward," said Premier **William Lai**.

"But at this point our emergency operation centre has not lowered its level of alert," he added.

It had not yet been decided whether the Taiwan government

would close financial markets, companies and schools on Thursday. (RTRS)

NZ MP denies spying: A New Zealand lawmaker received

military and intelligence training in China, it emerged Wednesday, but he denied allegations of being a Beijing spy, saying he was the victim of a racist smear campaign.

China-born MP **Jian Yang** was the subject of an investigation

by New Zealand's intelligence services over his links to an elite Chinese spy school, according to a joint investigation by the Financial Times (FT) and newsroom.co.nz.

The media organisations said Jian, who was elected to parlia-

ment in 2011, had not disclosed his background as a teacher at China's top linguistics academy for military intelligence officers.

New Zealand is a member of the "Five Eyes" intelligence-sharing network, which also includes the United States, Britain, Canada and Australia.

The FT said no other Western nation was known to have a sitting MP with such extensive links to China's intelligence community.

The revelation "raises questions about Western preparedness to deal with China's increasingly aggressive efforts to influence foreign governments and spy on them," said the newspaper.

Jian condemned the "defamatory statements" and said he was a proud New Zealander who had been transparent about his background.

He also questioned the timing of the allegations ahead of a September 23 election, in which his ruling National Party is in a tight race to retain power.

"This is a smear campaign by nameless people who are out to damage me and the National Party 10 days from an election, just because I am Chinese," he said in a statement. (AFP)



Singapore's new president-elect Halimah Yacob (left), greets her supporters at the nomination centre in Singapore on Sept 13. An establishment stalwart was named Singapore's first female president on Sept 13, but the milestone was overshadowed by criticism her selection was undemocratic after she was handed the job without a vote. (AFP)

Yacob S'pore 1st woman president

SINGAPORE, Sept 13, (RTRS): Singapore named former speaker of parliament Halimah Yacob as the multicultural city-state's first woman president on Wednesday while critics expressed dismay that other candidates were disqualified and the election went uncontested.

Aiming to strengthen a sense of inclusivity, Singapore had decreed the presidency, a largely ceremonial six-year post, would be reserved for candidates from the minority Malay community this time.